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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.**

**PRECIPITATING THE INEVITABLE: THE SURPRINGLY BENIGN
IMPACT OF LOSING BASING RIGHTS IN BAHRAIN**

by

Michael Koplovsky

FS-01, Foreign Service

**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of
the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily
endorsed by the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy,
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23 October 2006

Abstract

What if the U.S. military lost basing rights in Bahrain? Could the United States continue to achieve U.S. national security goals in the Persian Gulf and surrounding region -- including success in the War on Terrorism and responding to a resurgent Iran -- without the permanent presence of the U.S. Navy Fifth Fleet Command, a U.S. Marine Corps amphibious unit and pre-positioned U.S. Air Force materiel in Bahrain? This paper argues that alternate basing and other force posture options can in combination adequately compensate for lost advantages in terms of operational factors space, time, and force. In fact, the paper argues that such options could better reconcile risks and costs as the military adopts base realignment and force re-posturing, enhancing U.S. flexibility, responsiveness, and effectiveness. The loss of Bahrain basing rights might precipitate the inevitable evolution toward a more diversified, technologically advanced and flexible force posture and projection that deemphasizes a robust permanent forward presence, as recommended by recent Pentagon reports. While this paper analyzes the loss of access to Bahrain, the conclusions could apply to the loss of basing privileges in countries throughout the region.

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23 October 2006

Precipitating the Inevitable: The Surprisingly Benign Impact of Losing Basing Rights in Bahrain

What if the U.S. military lost basing rights in Bahrain? It has happened before. In 1977 the emirate evicted U.S. forces that had been based there since the 1940s.¹ Bahrain's majority Shiite population and political opposition to the Sunni leadership chafe at and disparage today's U.S. military presence there. Anti-American demonstrations are common. Attempted attacks on the U.S. base are not rare. Recently, for similar political and social reasons, the United States was forced to relinquish use of air bases in Saudi Arabia and in Uzbekistan in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

Could the United States continue to achieve U.S. national security goals in the Persian Gulf and surrounding region -- including success in the War on Terrorism and responding to a resurgent Iran -- without the permanent presence of the U.S. Navy Fifth Fleet Command, a U.S. Marine Corps amphibious unit and pre-positioned U.S. Air Force materiel in Bahrain? Alternate basing or other force posture options, if they exist, must offer the same (or at least adequately compensate for lost) advantages in terms of operational factors space, time, and force. Such options might better reconcile risks and costs as the military adopts base realignment and force re-posturing. Indeed, a loss of Bahrain basing rights might be a blessing in disguise, enhancing U.S. flexibility,

¹ Alvin J. Cottrell and Thomas H. Moorer, *U.S. Overseas Bases: Problems of Projecting American Military Power Abroad*, The Washington Papers Volume, V, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, DC (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1977), 57.

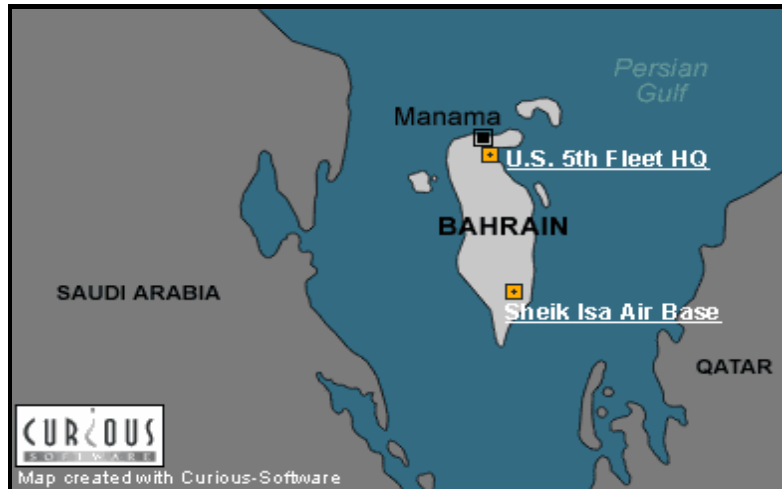
responsiveness, and effectiveness. The loss of Bahrain could precipitate the inevitable evolution toward a more diversified, technologically advanced and flexible force posture and projection capability that deemphasizes a robust permanent forward presence, as recommended by recent Pentagon reports.²



Bahrain

As this paper will demonstrate, a permanent U.S. military presence in Bahrain is not vital to achieving national goals. The United States has viable alternatives. The U.S. military is actively developing new supporting postures including sea-basing, rotational deployment, and enhanced lift capability. Permanent presence may carry unintended risks and costs, including political difficulties for host countries, exacerbated anti-Americanism, and force protection vulnerability. While this paper analyzes the loss of access to Bahrain, the conclusions could apply to the loss of basing privileges in countries throughout the region.

² Both the Department of Defense's 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* and its 2004 *Global Posture Review* (reports to Congress) advocate this.



Bases in Bahrain

U.S. Fifth Fleet, headquartered in Bahrain since 1991, provides naval command and control and support in the Persian Gulf (see map above). The fleet orchestrated naval operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Its missions also include “protecting the flow of oil, keeping a watchful eye on Iran, and support[ing] pro-Western Gulf monarchies against potential threats.”³ The naval surface force which rotates through the theater usually comprises 15 vessels, including an aircraft carrier group. There are about 680 men ashore. Helicopters and fixed winged aircraft that sustain theater forces and conduct intelligence gathering, surveillance, and reconnaissance use the military sector of Bahrain International Airport. The U.S. Air Force bases *inter alia* F-15s, F-16s, and KC-135s there and uses the Sheik Isa Airbase (see map above). The U.S. Marine Corps maintains a 220 man amphibious contingent in Bahrain. The United States has several pre-position warehouses and a forward headquarters for the U.S. Central Command. U.S. warships have access to the Mina Sulman port (see photograph next page), a large, new

³ Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment, The Gulf States, (Coulsdon, Surrey, UK: Jane’s Information Group Ltd., 2006), 48.

modern harbor that boasts the Barsec slipway, the largest slipway between Rotterdam and Hong Kong.⁴



Mina Sulman Port

WHAT ARE THE STAKES OF PULLING UP STAKES?

For the foreseeable future, U.S. strategic objectives in the Persian Gulf will include reconstructing and stabilizing Iraq, defending Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)⁵ allies and friends, frustrating Iran's nuclear intentions, checking Iran's regional dominance, enforcing UN sanctions and mandates, protecting energy flows, ensuring freedom of navigation, and preventing, deterring, detecting, and responding to terrorist threats.⁶

To deter potential adversaries (states or terrorist groups), the United States must maintain a presence -- either permanent, rotational, or intermittent -- that would clearly display U.S. commitment to friends and foes. Such a presence would also serve as a

⁴ Jane's Sentinel, 23 and 48.

⁵ GCC includes Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, and Oman.

⁶ According to Washington Institute for Near East Studies defense analyst Michael Knights, "CENTCOM's core mission remains maintenance of free flow of energy resources, U.S. access to regional states, freedom of navigation, and regional stability." – Michael Knights, Jane's Intelligence Review (September 2005).

robust early warning capability for conventional military threats or potential terrorist activity. The United States must be able to project force rapidly and to strike quickly and overwhelmingly in the area of operations against imminent threats and attacks. Pre-positioned materiel and forces and/or the means to transfer them quickly to the theater are vital enablers to a swift, decisive response. Amassing sufficient and appropriate forces in a volatile region like the Persian Gulf is essential to U.S. ability to achieve national security missions there.

Efforts to posture U.S. forces in order to realize these strategic and operational objectives while responding to budgetary and doctrinal changes have stimulated a proliferation of new basing and force projection concepts. Establishing Main Forward Operating Bases (MOBs) like Bahrain; Forward Operating Sites (FOSs); Cooperative Security Locations (CSLs) or “lily pads;” rotational visits; “flag afloat” (placing fleet headquarters aboard ships); sea-basing; and improved air and sea lift that would enable basing forces farther a field, even in the continental United States, are several of the options being considered and developed.

Each of these options carries risks and opportunities. Commanders must weigh the relative costs and effectiveness of the choices. They must balance questions of force protection, host nation public and leadership opinion, and Defense Department budgetary constraints. They must respond to mandates for increased flexibility. And they must fulfill operational requirements to deter, defend, and defeat adversaries, reassure and defend allies and friends, ensure freedom of navigation, and secure access to energy supplies. Combatant commanders must determine what mix of options to employ, which choices carry undue risk and cost and which are too vital to mission success to sacrifice.

Competing strategic demands and unintended effects complicate U.S. efforts. Permanent or frequent U.S. military presence can have a destabilizing effect in Arab/Muslim countries with incipient, growing, or strong anti-American sentiment. In addition, “Washington is hesitant to undermine its democratization agenda by accepting long-term over reliance on non-democratic regimes...”⁷ For their part, Gulf allies, “anxious to preserve their independence as well as their social and religious traditions,”⁸ are not categorically welcoming. The U.S. experience with basing, access, and pre-positioning agreements with Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia (not to mention Iran) have been limited, conditional, and ultimately unreliable. “The Middle East remains the one area in the United States global security system where host nations have kept American forces at arms length and successfully resisted permanent deployment. The United States encountered greater resistance to the permanent deployment of her troops in the Middle East than in any other region where she attempted to establish forward bases.”⁹

In 1997, RAND’s Graham Fuller and former State Department Policy Planning Staff member Ian Lesser concisely outlined the predicament:

If the West or the United States is to deter aggression by larger Gulf states, the temptation will be to continue efforts at forward deployment to facilitate future defense efforts. Yet forward deployment brings many dilemmas of its own. It strains perceptions of legitimacy and sovereignty within the Gulf states and ties the United States more tightly to the preservation of existing regimes. While forward presence may permit a swifter response with massive force...the economic and political costs of maintaining a large scale regional presence require careful assessment, not least because of the persistent risk of terrorism against U.S. forces.¹⁰

⁷ Michael Knights, in Jane’s Intelligence Review (August 05).

⁸ C.T. Sandars, *America’s Overseas Garrisons: the Leasehold Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 302.

⁹ Sandars, *America’s Overseas Garrisons*, 302.

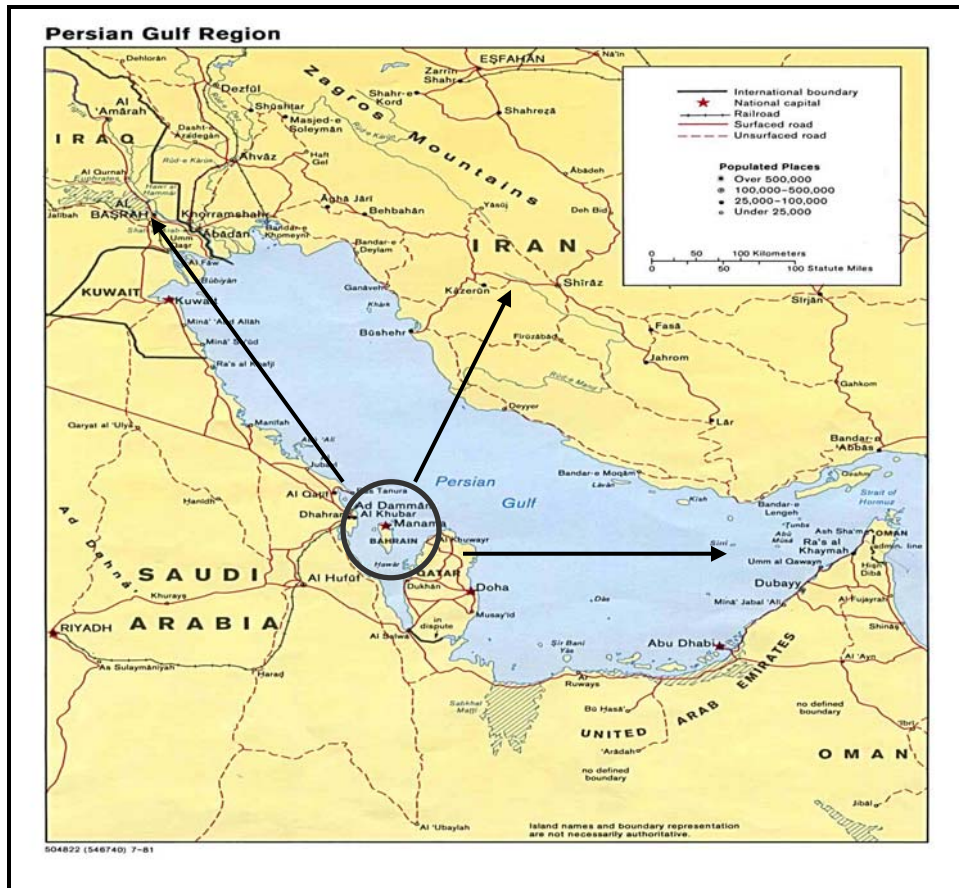
¹⁰ Graham E. Fuller and Ian O. Lesser, “Persian Gulf Myths,” in *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 76, Number 3, (May/June 1997): 51.

As it considers basing options, the U.S. military must try to reconcile myriad and often contradictory strategic goals. Commanders must design operational deployment and basing so as to increase rapid and overwhelming response capability while ensuring a smaller “footprint” in sensitive regions. The United States must remain true to its goal of nurturing democracy while meeting its commitments to defend and to protect monarchic allies. The United States should position itself for quick and effective defense against terrorist attacks (if not pre-emption) and build security cooperation while avoiding activities that could feed extremism. In this context, U.S. commanders would have to determine whether the loss of basing rights in Bahrain is bearable and if so, what options, if any, to pursue to compensate.

Quantifying the loss and comparing the alternatives will require a logical approach. Operational factors of time, space and force offer a clear and concise measure of the operational advantages of a forward operating base in Bahrain and a tool to gauge other options, whether alternative basing arrangements in other Gulf countries, sea-basing, or enhanced strategic lift.

QUANTIFYING THE LOSS IN OPERATIONAL TERMS

In concrete, practical terms, Bahrain’s port, airport, and slipway, modern infrastructure, advanced telecommunications network and the availability of quality goods and services on the local economy make it a desirable Main Operating Base location. Forces deployed there also enjoy advantages as defined by operational factors.



Bahrain - Interior Position/LOCs

In terms of operational factor space, Bahrain offers U.S. forces an advantageous central or interior location within the Persian Gulf (see map above).¹¹ Locating in Bahrain dramatically reduces the length of lines of communication (distances from the operations base to the deployment area), and provides a presence inside the 20.7 nautical mile wide Strait of Hormuz, a key maritime chokepoint through which two-thirds of the seaborne trade in crude oil flow (see map and satellite photograph below).¹² “The Gulf is

¹¹ Milan Vego, *Operational Warfare* (Newport RI: Naval War College 2000) 154-155. Vego opined that “such a position offers some advantages in both offense and defense...e.g. shorter lines of communication...could concentrate more quickly...” but confessed that a “force operating from a central location has a difficult task ensuring the security of lines of supply once hostilities start,” a key consideration in the Persian Gulf.

¹² Alistair Crouper, ed. *The Times Atlas and Encyclopaedia of the Sea*. (London: Times Books Ltd., 1989), 154.

unique in its configuration of many small vulnerable oil states, those states' strategic importance, and the global stake in regional stability.”^{13 14}



Strait of Hormuz



¹³ Vego, *Operational Warfare*, 154 and 177. Vego could have been describing the Strait of Hormuz when on p. 154 he stressed “the strategic importance of international straits, especially those offering the sole exit from an enclosed sea. Vego specifically cited the straits of Hormuz on p. 177 as “critically important for the uninterrupted flow of oil traffic.”

¹⁴ Fuller and Lesser, *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 97) 49.

A forward presence in Bahrain enables early warning capability for conventional military threats or potential terrorist activity, “buying time” for appropriate reaction.¹⁵ Pre-positioned materiel, forces, and command and control elements in Bahrain also compress mobilization and deployment time for U.S. forces in the region,¹⁶ allow for real time command and control, and provide more immediate warning through proximate and regular intelligence gathering, surveillance and reconnaissance.¹⁷

A Bahrain-based U.S. contingent provides a concentration of forces in a central point of a vital theater (see map below). Equipment based in Bahrain is a key factor in force effectiveness upon mobilization. Marine expeditionary forces and tactical air are more effective when forward deployed to a position such as Bahrain. A Main Forward Operating Base (MOB) such as Bahrain enhances logistical support and sustainment, through forward located organic assets and capabilities and through products and services procured locally.



¹⁵ James R. Blaker, *United States Overseas Basing, An Anatomy of a Dilemma* (New York: Praeger 1990) 154.

¹⁶ Vego, *Operational Warfare*, 51 Vego notes that “Reaction time can be shortened, especially in a crisis or sudden outbreak of hostilities by deploying one’s forces in forward areas of potential trouble...This is one of the reasons the U.S. Navy has permanently deployed ...the Fifth Fleet in the Arabian Gulf.” 51.

¹⁷ Blaker, *United States Overseas Basing*, 145.

WEIGHING BASING OPTIONS WHILE WEIGHING ANCHOR

The United States has other forward presence options. Forward basing arrangements are available in the Gulf that could offer the same operational advantages.

The search for alternative basing locations and arrangements in the Persian Gulf has been underway for more than a decade. Starting in the early 1990s, the United States negotiated pre-positioning agreements with Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, although all with the understanding of only temporary access.¹⁸ These agreements tried to reconcile Arab sensitivities to permanently stationed U.S. forces with expanding U.S. global obligations in the post Cold War world. “The policy of pre-positioning, backed up by frequent exercises suited the United States and her Arab allies alike.”¹⁹ By the mid-1990s the U.S. Government adopted temporary deployment, pre-positioning equipment, exercises and port calls to complement permanent deployment.²⁰ More recently, faced with the loss of bases in Saudi Arabia, the United States successfully negotiated a permanent presence at the Al Udeid airbase in Qatar. Qatar hosted U.S. Central Command Headquarters during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Construction continues apace (but very much out of the public view) on U.S. bases in Kuwait and Iraq. The United States is trying to arrange regular access to ports in the United Arab Emirates and Oman.

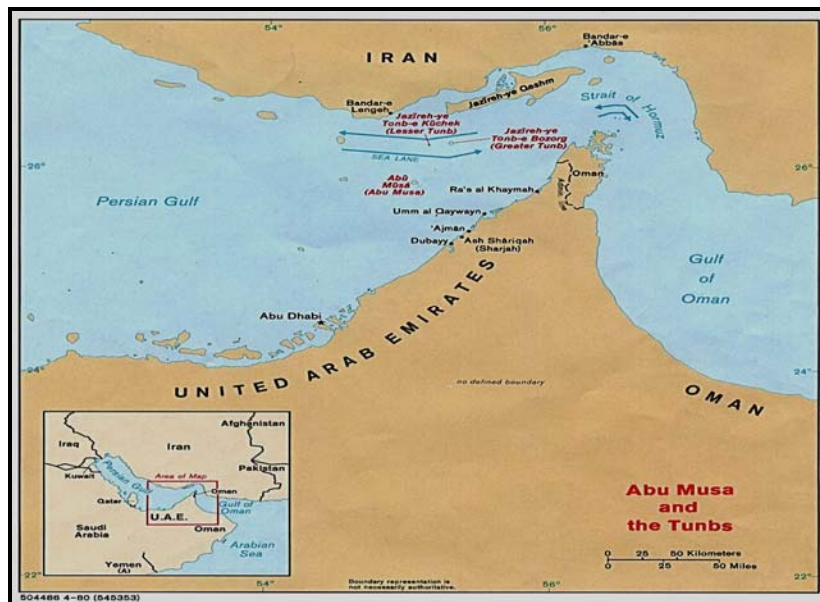
All these basing alternatives (except Oman) offer “interior” Persian Gulf positions options that would provide shortened lines of communication, increased flexibility, quick response times, intelligence gathering capabilities, tripwires, and local command and control. The diversification of military presence helps mitigate force protection

¹⁸ Sandars, *America's Overseas Garrisons*, 301.

¹⁹ Sandars, *America's Overseas Garrisons*, 300.

²⁰ Sandars, *America's Overseas Garrisons*, 19.

vulnerabilities and access denial risk. Except in Oman, alternate basing arrangements offer a U.S. commander access inside the Strait of Hormuz chokepoint.



Strait of Hormuz

But all overseas bases are not equal. U.S. forces have specific and exacting needs that not all locations can provide. Air, sea, and telecommunications logistics capacity vary widely throughout the region. None of the options to Bahrain offers a slipway that equals Barsec. As Jeffrey Record observed in his book *Projection of Power: Perspectives Perceptions and Problems*, in the Middle East “the United States possesses none of the critical operational and logistics benefits that it enjoys in comparative abundance in Europe where large military forces are firmly ensconced ashore and can count on the support of powerful and reliable allies.”²¹

In the Persian Gulf, the United States must contend with shifting support, weak partners, religious and cultural sensitivities, asymmetric challenges, and intense,

²¹ Cited in Sandars, *America's Overseas Garrisons*, 297.

sometimes violent anti-Americanism, which sometimes manifests itself in terrorist activity.

Reliability is another important factor. A 1980 agreement with Oman allowed the U.S. military to upgrade facilities on Masirah Island, but only for staging purposes; the Omanis forbade permanent deployment of U.S. troops. By 1985, the Government of Oman insisted on prior approval for all uses.²² Upon the loss of the Bahrain home-basing agreement in 1977, the U.S. Navy began relying more heavily on visits Iranian ports as it moved the balance of its naval basing back to Diego Garcia.²³ This arrangement would not survive the unexpected (in U.S. quarters) 1979 revolution in Iran. Continued U.S. engagement in Iraq, unwavering support for Israel and intensifying tensions with Iran, could jeopardize access in other Gulf states.

BASES?!? WE DON'T NEED NO STINKIN' BASES!

Large, permanent, forward U.S. bases (MOBs) are falling out of favor. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been endeavoring to “review, reduce, and realign”²⁴ its presence abroad. Both the February 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review and the September 2004 Global Defense Posture report reflected the Pentagon’s expectation of a “more diffuse and unpredictable” future environment. The reports call for power projection by expeditionary forces deployed by strategic airlift or sealift combined with “a light screen of forward deployed forces rotating through a broader portfolio of

²² Sandars, *America’s Overseas Garrisons*, 294.

²³ Cottrell and Moorer, *U.S. Overseas Bases*, 60.

²⁴ Carnes Lord, *Reposturing the Force: U.S. Overseas Presence in the 21st Century*, Newport Papers #26, February 2006 (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2006), 5.

temporary bases.”²⁵ These temporary bases would include training hubs and pre-positioning sites as well as a network of CSLs – host nation facilities where the United States negotiates contingency access but would not maintain presence. CSLs could be spread across dozens of nations. Forward deployed units shuttling or rotating through multiple bases during training tours (often using pre-positioned equipment) would thus afford operational factor advantages of MOBs. This arrangement will appear temporary, but in fact maintain a more or less constant U.S. deterrent and operational presence.²⁶

According to Richard Sokolosky, a more flexible posture addresses the U.S. need to “diversify its dependence on regional basing and forward presence as well as reduce the visibility and predictability of its forward deployed forces.” Sokolosky’s 2002 National Defense University Institute for Strategic Studies report concluded that the United States must diversify deployment patterns, take advantage of new basing concepts (such as sea-basing and CSLs), expand pre-positioning of equipment, and concentrate efforts on multilateral cooperation. The study recommends the U.S. military reduce visibility and predictability of fixed deployments in the Persian Gulf by adopting a rotational posture characterized by regular movements of units through a wider variety of training and exercise locations. This approach should maintain forward presence in operational factor terms, while increasing force protection. Sokolosky admits, however, that this idea relies on improved U.S. lift and rapid deployment capabilities.²⁷

Former Commander Southern Command General Paul Gorman has advocated an “Echelonning Rearward” posture characterized by self-sustaining units which would leave

²⁵ Strengthening U.S. Global Defense Posture Report to Congress, September 2004 and Quadrennial Defense Review February 2006.

²⁶ Michael Knights, *Jane’s Intelligence Review* August 2005.

²⁷ Richard D. Sokolosky, *Beyond Containment: Defending U.S. Interests in the Persian Gulf*, (Washington: Institute for National Security Studies, National Defense University, 2002).

their non-essential personnel and equipment aboard ships or in the United States. This idea differs from pre-positioning, which requires dual sets of equipment and a significant “footprint” in a host country. Gorman acknowledges that Echeloning Rearward places enormous burdens on communication and transportation links, but, he claims, it was used to great effect in Honduras in the 1980s.²⁸ Effective power projection (i.e. factor force) from rear-echeloned forces in continental United States to the Persian Gulf, half way around the world, would surely be more challenging than to Latin America, however.

Recognizing the vulnerability of permanent basing arrangements -- to terrorist or other enemy attack, capricious and unreliable “allies,” or even denial by opposing forces -- some have argued for sea-basing. Sea-basing -- the development of large floating

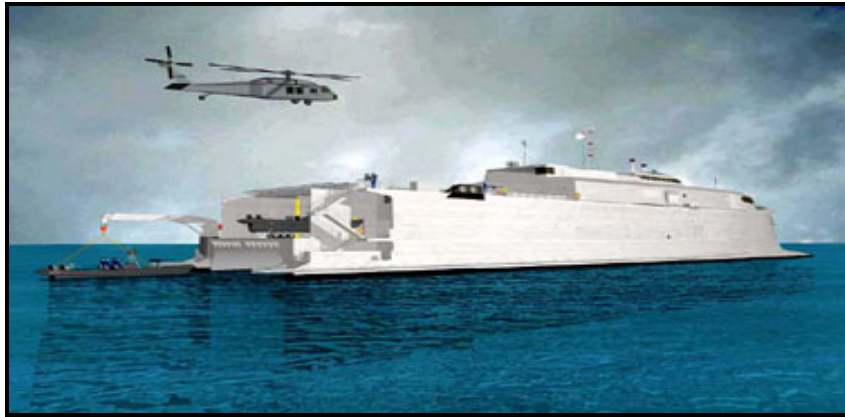


Sea Basing Concept

platforms and multi-ship structures that could serve as forward operation bases, pre-positioning depots, and command and control centers -- is an attractive response to

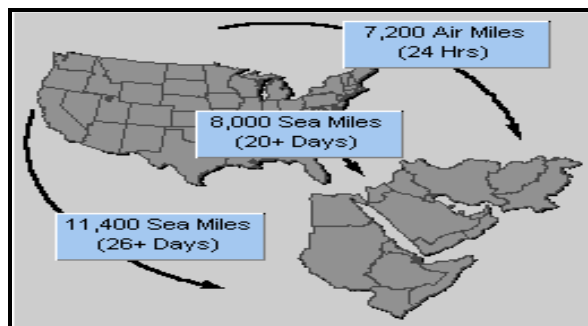
²⁸ Blaker, *United States Overseas Basing*, 160-161.

limited access to overseas bases (see figures above and below). This idea -- first mooted three decades ago -- is supported in academic circles and among U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps planners.



Sea Basing Concept

Middle East defense analyst Michael Knights believes a reduction of the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf could be compensated through visiting battalion sized land forces and air wings. These forces would participate in training and combined exercises. Knights characterizes this new evolution in basing and forward deployment as “enduring access, episodic employment.”²⁹



The Pentagon’s confidence that it can deploy forces within 24 hours anywhere in the world (see chart/map above) should deter aggressors, reassure allies, and comfort

²⁹ Knights, Jane’s Intelligence Review May 2005.

operational commanders. For now, only small, light units can be transported into an operational theater that quickly. Faster and more sea- and airlift capability, particularly trans-oceanic assets, would be needed. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review calls for increased airlift appropriations and development of Joint High Speed Vessels (JHSVs) (see picture below) for intra-theater transport.³⁰



Joint High Speed Vessel

By establishing a network of cooperative locations and forward bases in Africa and Asia and through deepened security cooperation efforts, the United States could bolster its ability to project force to the Persian Gulf. While the use of temporary or permanent bases in South Asia or East Africa would not secure an interior Persian Gulf position, it would enable effective launch pads for rear-echeloning and proximate command and control, thus addressing operational factor time considerations.

These new concepts promise many of the same advantages in terms of factor time, space, and force as a permanent operating base such as the U.S. presence in Bahrain. By pre-positioning equipment, deploying forces afloat or on rotating training missions, or by investing in increased lift capability and through creative sustainment techniques, U.S. planners believe the military can enjoy a de facto interior position in the Persian Gulf, by

³⁰ *Quadrennial Defense Review 2006.*

amassing sufficient force inside the key Strait of Hormuz at will. New concepts will allow quick reaction, allaying fears of factor time effects. Proponents of these “episodic,” “rotational,” “afloat,” and other ad hoc arrangements are persuaded that the United States will be able to muster enough and appropriate power in the right place and at the right time to succeed.

...OR DO WE NEED BASES?

Based on some of these previous arguments, the United States military needs neither a base in Bahrain nor close facsimiles in neighboring countries. This is not necessarily the case. Many experts and military leaders have long argued that forward operating bases in the traditional sense are crucial to the United States’ ability to project force quickly and in sufficient mass to achieve strategic objectives. Challenging the Pentagon’s basing conclusion flowing from changing threat nature, Pennsylvania State University’s Robert Harkavy argues that “the diverse, uncertain, and global nature of the emerging threat environment requires a robust global basing and posture structure.”³¹

In a 1988 speech (admittedly with a Cold War emphasis), former Chief of Naval Operations and Pacific Commander Admiral Thomas Hayward opined:

Our forward deployed forces...are essential to the maintenance of a regional power balance which deters aggression and promotes regional stability...[they] provide immediate capability to deal with political or military crises. Our bases provide us with an ability to support our peacetime forward operations while extending the reaches of our forces. In wartime they would be the critical link in assuring the logistic lifelines of our force to achieve the forward defense of the United States...forward deployment without the bases would be harder and more costly.³²

³¹ Robert E. Harkavy, “Thinking about Basing, in Reposturing the Force: U.S. Overseas Presence in the 21st Century,” in Newport Papers #26, February 2006 (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2006), 29.

³² Thomas Hayward, “Forward Operations, Basing Rights,” Speech delivered at the U.S. Naval Institute in Hawaii, 1988.

Former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Thomas Moorer and Alvin J. Cottrell have argued that “bases and other facilities acquired for meeting communications, logistics and ‘flag showing’ requirements...are crucial to the mission of projecting U.S. military power and influence abroad for political purposes as well as for meeting geopolitical contingencies.” They reject CSLs and sea-basing concepts, warning that the United States “could find itself dependent upon an essentially all-afloat posture with only selective access to a scattering of bases and friendly ports around Eurasia; that access further constrained in many instances by the necessity of obtaining prior diplomatic clearance from the host nation.”³³ Underscoring the current emphasis on flexibility and mobility (and unintentionally addressing Bahrain’s factor space logistical advantages), they further wrote: “the United States will increasingly rely on strategic mobility and flexibility...[factors/capabilities] which are greatly enhanced by the existence of support facilities at strategic locations throughout the world.”³⁴

Retreating from forward bases could undermine the goals of deterring adversaries and assuring allies and friends: “Any U.S. withdrawal from an established base tends to be interpreted as a more general U.S. retrenchment from the country or region involved.”³⁵ For the host country, it can be argued that in addition to providing security guarantees, a permanent U.S. military presence enhances security cooperation, furthers diplomatic initiatives and contributes to economic development.

U.S. Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Ryan Henry balances the arguments for and against permanent basing in the Middle East by advocating a posture of “presence without permanence.” He notes that to develop operational flexibility and diversity of

³³ Cottrell and Moorer, *U.S. Overseas Bases*, 55.

³⁴ Cottrell and Moorer, *U.S. Overseas Bases*, 10.

³⁵ Cottrell and Moorer, *U.S. Overseas Bases*, 7.

options needed to contend with uncertainty in the “arc of instability,”³⁶ U.S. global force posture requires “forces positioned forward on a continual basis, with access and facilities that enable them to reach any potential crisis spot quickly.”³⁷ However, Henry concedes the relevance of rapid deployability through pre-positioning, strategic lift, and enhanced en route global infrastructure.³⁸ He proposes establishing, maintaining or upgrading forward operating sites and CSLs for rotational and contingency purposes along with pre-positioned equipment and forward command and control elements.

COSTS AND RISKS

Forward operating bases incur financial burdens on the United States as well. Costs include building, maintaining and improving infrastructure (e.g. runways, barracks, roads, warehouses, bunkers, wharves, and training facilities), service industry support, licensing, building permits and indirect taxes, and “permission costs.” Permission costs can take the form of explicit payments to the host government, or implicit *quid pro quo* security and development assistance programs. However, alternatives to significant permanent basing carry their own price tags. For example, adequate flag afloat, sea-basing, or enhanced lift capability would require massive research and development funds and huge capital investments.³⁹

³⁶ The Persian Gulf is the center of this “arc” extending from North Africa across the Middle East and South Asia to Southeast Asia.

³⁷ Ryan Henry, “Transforming the U.S. Global Defense Posture,” in *Reposturing the Force: U.S. Overseas Presence in the 21st Century* in Newport Papers #26, February 2006 (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2006), 39.

³⁸ Henry, “Transforming the U.S. Global Defense Posture” in *Reposturing the Force: U.S. Overseas Presence in the 21st Century*, Newport Papers #26, February 2006 (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2006), 40.

³⁹ Harkavy, “Thinking about Basing,” in Newport Papers # 26, 30 “While sea-basing and CONUS basing are serious alternatives to land-basing by virtue of technological improvements in long-range strike systems, there are serious questions of cost and feasibility in relation to important categories of scenarios, especially for sea-basing.”

Forward operating bases can carry unintended risks, like alienating the host country.⁴⁰ A U.S. forward presence intended to act as a deterrent and early warning for the War on Terrorism may in fact produce increased support or sympathy for ideological extremists and terrorists. While permanent or semi-permanent presence would help bolster Gulf allies' efforts to fight the War on Terrorism, a significant U.S. "footprint" would likely feed regional extremists' anti-American campaigns.

Large permanent U.S. military installations can be attractive targets to terrorists and conventional nation state enemies. Concentrating forward deployed forces puts the U.S. military's "eggs in one basket," necessitating robust force protection measures. Occasional attacks and plots – thwarted until now – should give pause to those considering the risks of permanent operating bases like the U.S. facilities in Bahrain.

CONCLUSION

Despite adamant arguments outlining the essential nature of U.S. forward bases to achieve military goals, the availability of options seems to blunt the claims. Real concerns about risks and costs further undermine the case for the necessity of a Bahrain base. Given its other options (many of which the United States is actively considering or pursuing), it appears that the United States can achieve its national security goals without a permanent base in Bahrain. Bases in other Gulf States, a reliable and credible lift capacity, sea-basing, and "rear-echeloning" collectively promise to compensate adequately in terms of operational factors. While each alternative has its own

⁴⁰ Blaker, *United States Overseas Basing*, 134-5. "overseas bases alienate the foreign nations in which they are located, making it difficult to enlist their support when it is really needed. ...overseas basing is the most visible challenge to nationalistic sensitivities about sovereignty...U.S. overseas bases, in this view, may turn out to be more of a lightening rod for anti-American sentiment and nationalistic yearnings than a potent instrument of U.S. foreign policy. ...overseas basing may be counterproductive to maintaining the capacity to use military force effectively or to successful foreign policy."

weaknesses, adopting a balanced combination of these options would enable the United States to deter and/or defend against Iran, reassure and protect Gulf allies and friends, conduct effective campaigns against terrorist groups, ensure free passage of energy exports through the Strait of Hormuz, and continue its reconstruction and stability activities in Iraq without a permanent presence in Bahrain. The very real danger of unintended consequences -- including eroding support for the United States, generating political troubles for regional partners, feeding perceptions of weak U.S. commitment to democracy, and stoking ideological recruitment -- argue against a large permanent presence. Forward deployed U.S. forces' vulnerability to attack is another important concern.

In an era of shrinking budgets and moves toward restructuring, a base in Bahrain might be a relic of obsolete U.S. force structure and projection. By kicking the U.S. military out, the Bahrainis could precipitate timely adoption of a new U.S. force posture with reduced overseas footprint, increased flexibility, diminished risk, and faster reaction.



Escorting Tankers in the Persian Gulf

The United States has lived without Bahrain before. In the late 1970s, following the loss of the home-porting agreement, the United States shifted to a “flag afloat” posture, rotating ships through the Persian Gulf without a permanent support base or Fifth Fleet Command ashore at Bahrain. During the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, the United States Navy successfully escorted tankers without a permanent naval presence in the Persian Gulf. Without adequate support in theater U.S. capabilities can be stretched to and even beyond their limits. One might argue that the 1980 Iran hostage rescue effort⁴¹ might have been more successful if launched and coordinated from a forward operating base in the Persian Gulf.



Desert One -- Failed Hostage Rescue

Today, “flag afloat” is an expensive option. The U.S. Navy does not have a ship large or advanced enough to provide adequate communications connections or command and control, or to accommodate a Fifth Fleet staff. One would have to be built or costly adjustments and improvements made to realize a flagship command posture.

In operational terms, “U.S. interests require the capacity to move, use, and sustain forces with dispatch and effectiveness.”⁴² The question is whether a forward base in

⁴¹ The failure of the operation has also been blamed on lack of “jointness.” See Benjamin S. Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Airpower* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 108.

⁴² Blaker, *United States Overseas Basing*, 168.

Bahrain is essential to achieving this capacity in the Persian Gulf. A cursory look at the ample inventory of options, a preference by the current American political leadership for increased flexibility and diversification of risk, and a calculation of the possible costs, both financial and political, leads to a comforting if surprising conclusion: Not only could the U.S. military absorb the loss of basing rights in Bahrain, but it would force earlier adoption of the more flexible and reactive posture envisioned in ongoing military transformation. The debate over basing options is not over, but the sudden loss of a key forward operating base could help focus policymakers and operational strategists by forcing decisions with important ramifications. The loss of access to Bahrain, and a decision to rely on smaller “footprint” alternatives (e.g. intermittent access, sea-basing, or a shipboard “flag afloat” naval command headquarters), could be a blessing in disguise.



A Smaller Footprint

At a minimum, the United States should plan for and be prepared to execute the mission without bases in Bahrain. By investing in and advancing research and development into sea-basing and enhanced air and sea lift, designing rotational training and exercises, pre-positioning equipment, and redoubling efforts to negotiate various access rights, the United States will have prepared itself for the operational challenges a loss of basing rights might present, perhaps even better preparing itself for future challenges in the region.

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